

# Care and affective relations: Social justice and sociology

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**Kathleen Lynch**

University College Dublin Equality Studies Centre, Ireland

**Manolis Kalaitzake**

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Germany

**Margaret Crean**

University College Dublin School of Education, Ireland

**Abstract**

This article examines the ways in which the care-indifferent and gendered character of much political egalitarian theory has contributed to a disregard for the care-relational dimensions of social injustice within the social sciences. It demonstrates how the lack of in-depth engagement with affective relations of love, care and solidarity has contributed to an underestimation of their pivotal role in generating injustices in the production of people in their humanity. While humans are political, economic and cultural beings, they are also what Tronto has termed *homines curans*. Yet, care, in its multiple manifestations, is treated as a kind of 'cultural residual', an area of human life that the dominant culture neglects, represses and cannot even recognize for its political salience. If sociology takes the issue of relational justice as seriously as it takes issues of redistribution, recognition and political representation, this would provide an intellectual avenue for advancing scholarship that recognizes that much of life is lived, and injustices are generated, outside the market, formal politics and public culture. A new sociology of affective care relations could enhance a normatively-led sociology of inequality, that is distinguishable from, but intersecting with, a sociology of inequality based on class (redistribution), status (recognition) and power (representation). It would also help change public discourse about politics by making affective in/justices visible intellectually and politically, and in so doing, identifying ways in which they could be a site of resistance to capitalist values and processes.

**Keywords**

affective relations, care, feminist, Fraser, neoliberal capitalism, politics-love, social justice

**Corresponding author:**

Kathleen Lynch, University College Dublin, UCD Equality Studies Centre, School of Education, Dublin 4, Ireland.

Email: [Kathleen.Lynch@ucd.ie](mailto:Kathleen.Lynch@ucd.ie)**MPIfG Journal Article**

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## Introduction

The pursuit of competitive self-interest as a global ethic represents a serious challenge to the care and solidarity humanity needs for its survival; yet rugged, self-referential individualism is endemic to neoliberal capitalism (Federici, 2012; Streeck, 2016). Given its hegemonic cultural status (Leyva, 2018), and the institutionalization of its values in globally powerful multilateral agencies (Kentikelenis & Babb, 2019), it is time to renew the challenge to the moral order of neoliberal capitalism; sociology has an important role to play in this process.

There is a need for a re-normativized sociology that recognizes that morality is endemic to culture, and a worthy subject of analysis (Sayer, 2011; Vandenberghe, 2018). Knowing how people relate together normatively is part of knowing them sociologically because people know and live in the world in an evaluative, value-laden way. A sense of what is moral exists within people, defining, orienting and regulating their actions from within (Vandenberghe, 2017, p. 410); things matter outside of formal politics and the economy (Sayer, 2011). Among the things that frame people's evaluations and their ethical dispositions are their relationships and commitments to love, care and showing solidarity with each other. Thinking through and with care<sup>1</sup> is also a different epistemological perspective, an other-centred way of knowing the world with the intention of addressing its injustices (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

The theoretical claims for this article arise from a range of empirical studies over the last 15 years on relations of love, care and solidarity in intimate, professional and public life. Although each study had a distinct focus, all examined people's experience of doing care, be it in families or professional settings, or through their solidarity actions at times of crises. It also involved research with those who were cared for as well as carers. The studies were qualitative: over 200 conversations and interviews were held with people from different social class, age, gender and ethnic backgrounds, and in different care and professional settings; focus groups, site visits and observations within organizations and households were undertaken, while documentary evidence was also compiled (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2009b, 2012, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

What is clear from these studies is that the nurturing work that produces love, care and solidarity is identified by those doing and receiving it as a distinct set of social relations that have a formative impact and are deeply normative in character. Even though care-related values do not take priority all at times, they can and do frame consciousness in relational other-centred ways that need to be understood sociologically, not least because the logic of care is very different to both market logic and the logic of bureaucratic and scientific rationality (Bryson, 2014; Mol, 2008). As care is fluid, it has no clear boundaries, and no career structure; it is governed by its own ethical-relational logic and cannot be completed in the measurable time that both bureaucratization and commodification require (Folbre & Bittman, 2004; Mol, 2008; Tronto, 1993).

This article attempts to contribute to the sociological understanding of affective relations, especially as these relate to care and social justice. It makes a case for an extension of the three-dimensional redistribution/recognition/representation theory of justice (Fraser, 2003, 2008) to include a fourth dimension, relational justice. It suggests that an

affective care-relational understanding of social injustices would enrich both sociological and political egalitarian theory and practice.

The article opens with an overview of Fraser's theory of justice (2008) and an analysis of why her three-dimensional framework should be extended to take account of sociological research on affective care relations. It then explores why sociological studies of affect should give greater attention to relations of love, care and solidarity as key dimensions of affective practice (Wetherell, 2015), especially in matters of social justice. The ways in which some key epistemological and ontological premises governing sociological thinking impede recognition of the unique ethical character of affective care relations are then examined, as are the impediments to affective justice under neoliberal capitalism. The article concludes by making the case for taking affective care-relational justice more seriously in sociology. Focusing sociological attention on affective equality and relational justice opens a space for new normatively informed modes of scientific analysis, and in doing so contributes to the intellectual frames challenging the care-indifferent immoralities of capitalism.

### **Fraser: Participatory parity, care and social justice**

Nancy Fraser's work, located at the intersection between critical theory, feminist theory and poststructuralism, is highly influential across the social sciences. Her major texts are widely cited generating ongoing debates among philosophers, political theorists and sociologists regarding social justice. Given her influence especially in the articulation of the relationship between recognition, redistribution and representation as the key dimensions of justice (Dahl et al., 2004), her work is of profound importance in sociology.

In dialogue with Axel Honneth (Fraser, 2003), and in *Scales of Justice* (2008), Fraser moved beyond the perspectival dualism of *redistribution* and *recognition* that was a defining feature of her earlier work (Fraser, 1995). She endorsed a three-dimensional theory of social justice, incorporating issues of political *representation* as social justice matters. She recognized the 'relative autonomy of inequities rooted in the political constitution of society, as opposed to the economic structure or the status order' (2008, p. 6). One of the benefits of this revised framework is that it enabled scholars to re-conceive *scale* and *scope* as questions of justice and thereby to move beyond a Keynesian–Westphalian framework that takes the *who* of social justice as being 'the domestic political citizenry' (2008, p. 30).

Grounded in the view that equality and social justice are principally problems of parity of participation, Fraser claims that 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) [*sic*] members of society to interact with one another as peers' (Fraser, 2003, p. 36). She outlines three key conditions that are required for the principle of participatory parity to be upheld. These are grounded sociologically in having equality in economic relations, political relations and cultural relations. 'All three conditions are necessary for participatory parity. None alone is sufficient' (Fraser, 2010, p. 365). The ways in which affective care relations operate as a discrete and relatively autonomous site of social relations that impact in intersecting ways on participatory parity are not fully explored (Lynch, 2014). Relatedly, neither are the ways in which age *per se* can be

an inequality-producing mechanism (Akkan, 2020; Winker & Degele, 2011), enabling or disabling parity of participation.

The neglect of affective relations arises from the way the ontological *who* of social justice is framed in Fraser's paradigm, namely as an independent adult. The *who* of social injustice is also premised on an individualist rather than relational concept of the person. How participatory parity is constrained by inter/dependency-defined relational identities is not fully conceptualized. How, if, and when those who are highly dependent on others at a given time due to age, illness and/or disability can have participatory parity is unclear.

A related ontological *who* problem arises at the other side of the care equation. Those who are carers, especially carers of the highly dependent, are generally not free to engage in the pursuit of social justice claims politically, unless they can reassign that care to others; reassigning unpaid vital family/intimate caring, for even a relatively short time, is not an option for carers, most of whom are women (Oxfam, 2020). Not only can most people not afford to pay for caring, care labour is not a product but a process that goes on over time (Mol, 2008); it cannot be completely commodified and marketized (Oksala, 2016, p. 299).

In sum, the imminence, urgency and, in the case of love labour, non-substitutability, of intimate high dependency care and love labour (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017; Kittay, 1999; Lynch, 2007) seriously limits the capacity of *both* the carer and the cared for to exercise participatory parity in politics (Crean, 2018). And it is impossible to exercise parity of participation in much of economic, cultural and political life unless unavoidable and inevitable high dependency love and care work is undertaken conterminously by others. This is a particular political issue for women who are the world's default carers, paid and unpaid, as many feminist scholars have demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

## Sociology and affective relations

The work of Spinoza (1910/1996) has spawned a major philosophical tradition focused on affect, reflected in the work of Deleuze (Meiborg & Van Tuinen, 2016).<sup>4</sup> The work of Deleuze had been complemented by an extensive body of sociological, social psychological and cultural research on affect (Ahmed, 2004; Barbalet, 2002; Brennan, 2004; Clough with Halley, 2007; Crossley, 2001; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Shilling, 2012; Walkerdine & Jiminez, 2012; Wehrs & Blake, 2017).<sup>5</sup> While the study of affect operates across very different disciplines, the frames currently deployed for understanding affective relations in social, cultural and political settings do not take adequate account of more recent psychological and social psychological research (Wetherell, 2015, p. 140). Much of the research on affect is quite abstract including that of political theorists such as Hardt and Negri, who identify affective labour as immaterial (2000, 2009). But affects are not ephemeral and abstract in psychological terms; they constitute *affective practices* and cannot be removed from relationships, and from the cultural and social contexts through which they are lived corporeally and mentally (Wetherell, 2015).<sup>6</sup> This is especially true in care terms as caring is defined in its doing, in its practice, not just in its thinking (Ruddick, 1989, pp. 13–16). It is an embodied practice (Lanoix, 2013; Mol, 2008). While some sociologists researching the interface of social class and affect

recognize the materiality of affect (Friedman, 2016; Reay, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine & Jiminez, 2012; Walkerdine et al., 2001), as does work examining how affective relations are impacted by power-related injustices arising from gender and sexuality (Juvonen & Kolehmainen, 2018) and race (Ahmed, 2012), the embodied character and ethical dilemmas posed by care and love work have been neglected in much of the debate about affect (Lanoix, 2013; Oksala, 2016).

Being *needy* is a quality shared by all of humanity (Tronto, 2013, p. 29). Humans call out for care as needy people, and give care, often at the same time. People are *homines curans* (caring people) as well as *homo economicus* and *homo politicus*, they can and do act other-wise as well as self-wise (Tronto, 2017). Care-giving and receiving applies not only in intimate primary care settings, but in professional and community contexts (Lynch et al., 2012; Walkerdine & Jiminez, 2012), and in political settings (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Because care relations are ethically-oriented, nurturing-led affective relations that are socially and culturally grounded (Oksala, 2016; Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017), they need to be examined as a discrete sphere of affect studies in sociology. The doing and non-doing of caring matters not only in terms of who does the work (something that is well researched in sociology) but in terms of who needs (different degrees of) love, care and solidarity, which is all of humanity at different times (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).<sup>7</sup>

## **Why affective relations of love, care and solidarity matter sociologically**

Care is a loaded concept; while it signifies an ethical orientation and action showing concern for others, it also has a dark side (Martin et al., 2015). As with concepts of love, solidarity and justice, there are many violations committed in its name (Patel & Moore, 2018, pp. 111–137). Moreover, care can be a very selective mode of attention, leading to the neglect of those who are excluded from ‘care’ frames; and it can render those dependent on ‘care’ powerless and indebted, as has been recognized by disability scholars (Morris, 2001; Oliver & Barnes, 1998). And there is a moral imperative on women to care (O’Brien, 2007) at a high personal and social cost (Bubeck, 1995), especially if they are working class, poor and/or minority women (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014; Skeggs, 1997, pp. 56–73).

Yet life, in both its human and non-human forms, cannot be lived well without care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Affective relations are a specific manifestation of this caring arising from human dependencies and interdependencies through which people make and remake each other ‘by labouring and enduring one another’ in ‘humane co-affective relations’ (Matheis, 2014, pp. 12–13). Without it, people would not survive given the high dependency of humans at birth and at times of vulnerability (Fineman, 2004; Kittay, 1999).

The importance of caring is recognized by those who are vulnerable due to age including children and young people (Luttrell, 2020), and older people (Lolich et al., 2019). And care consciousness is an empirically observable sociological phenomenon (Crean, 2018), a commitment to the needs of others that is identified by those who care as central to their identities (Lynch & Lyons, 2009, pp. 54–77; Stets & McCaffree, 2014).

What makes the nurturing relations that produce love, care and solidarity different to other systems of social relations is that they operate under an ethic of other-centredness, even when they fail in this purpose. They are normatively driven, centred first on caring for the neediness in others: the development and basic well-being of another is their direct end (Engster, 2005, p. 51). Saying this, is not to deny that affective relations are simultaneously power, status and economically imbricated relations. But they are relationally-led in a normative way that does not apply to market-led, or many other contractual political or cultural relations.

While care does contribute to the maintenance of workers for capitalism (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Müller, 2019), love, care and solidarity produce much that capitalism does not need or want. Care work cannot be reduced to its socially-reproductive market-capitalist purposes; to do so is to dismiss life outside of the market economy in terms of affective relational value. It is to implicitly endorse the very capitalist values one seeks to undermine.

Affective care relations are not social derivatives therefore, subordinate to economic, political, or cultural relations in social life. They constitute distinct ethically-informed, nurturing-led social relations, that take different manifestations culturally, but whose primary intent is to be with and co-create others relationally in a non-alienating, non-exploitable way.

## **Disciplinary peripheralization and ontological impediments**

There is a deep ambivalence in Western society about caring and loving generally (hooks, 2000). Caring is generally equated with feminized and emotionally driven labour, a pre-given essentialist female capability that does not require resourcing, education, or political support. Yet, neither economic, political nor cultural institutions can function effectively without the care institutions of society (Fineman, 2004; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993, 2013).

There are a number of epistemological and ontological assumptions regarding affective care relations that have doxa-like status in mainstream social sciences; they are unarticulated and taken as given within the canon of the discipline (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 68). A defining feature of these is that they frame the ontological subjects of sociological analysis individually rather than relationally (Archer, 2000; Donati & Archer, 2015); this has significant implications for how we understand the politics, economics and culture of social change. The scope, meaning and normative promise of social actions are framed in a way that forestalls analysis and debate about the generative power of inter/dependencies (Mooney, 2014, pp. 36–38).

While the epistemological and ontological limitations of modern sociology have been contested in terms of its Eurocentrism and provincialism (Alatas, 2003; Bhambra, 2014; Bhambra & de Sousa Santos, 2017; Connell, 2007; Mignolo, 2009<sup>8</sup>), the ways in which sociology is relatively silent on the injustices arising from the dependencies/interdependencies of affective relations represent a distinct kind of epistemological and ontological exclusion, an affective and gendered provincialism within the discipline.

Although the non-recognition of vulnerability and care-driven inter/dependency has been documented by feminist scholars across disciplines (Acker, 1990; Fineman, 2008;



Folbre, 2001; Gilligan, 1982; Gilson, 2011; Held, 2006; hooks, 2000; Kittay, 1999; Williams, 2018), their thinking does not frame the dominant paradigms of social scientific practice. They are defined as feminist scholars (care feminists) rather than mainstream social scientists, lawyers, or philosophers. And, while the lack of sociological scholarship on care has been recognized recently (Aulenbacher et al., 2018), with the exception of Williams's (2018) paper, the special monograph of *Current Sociology* devoted to care<sup>9</sup> does not address the deep ontological and epistemological limitations of sociological scholarship on care and affective relations.

The denial of the centrality of emotions to social, political life and intellectual life, and particularly the emotional work involved in producing human beings through nurturing is another impediment to understanding the centrality of affective care relations in social life. The view of rationality that prevails, namely economic utilitarianism, defines people as 'rational maximizers of satisfactions' and presumes that emotions are distinct from rationality (Posner, 1981). Yet, emotions are reasonable (Nussbaum, 2001), and reason and value are not polarized concepts analytically (Barbalet, 2002; Vandenberghe, 2017), something economists also appreciate (Kahneman, 2003; Loewenstein, 2010). Empirically established facts can be both empirically true, and normatively and emotionally engaged (Sayer, 2011, pp. 36–41). As a socially ubiquitous, emotionally engaged, normative practice, care is therefore an important sociological research subject in its own right.

A third impediment arises from the presumption of self-sufficiency as an ideal human state. Western political theorists, whose work informs disciplines such as sociology, have upheld a separatist view of the person, often disregarding the reality of human dependency and interdependency across the life course (Benhabib, 1992). Moreover, they have idealized independence as a sign of maturity and growth, placing a premium on a human condition that is never fully realizable (England, 2005; Kittay, 1999). The problem intellectually and politically is that the presumption of independence mutates from an analytical supposition into an ethic of good social research practice; what is presumed to be typical becomes normative in sociological terms. Insofar as it downgrades relationality, this type of ontological thinking has glorified a concept of the person that is potentially unethical: it is assumed that to be detached, and accountable primarily to the separated self, represents the ideal form of self-realization.

The fourth impediment to recognizing the sociological significance of affective care relations arises from the way principles of value neutrality have exercised axiological standing in social scientific analysis generally, and in sociology, in particular (Sayer, 2017; Vandenberghe, 2018). While maintaining the separation between fact and value is vital to avoid representing *a priori* assumptions and values as empirically valid 'facts', the analytical distinction between fact and value is a false binary in sociological terms, not least because facts are 'entangled' with values<sup>10</sup> (Gorski, 2017) and values, when transformed into subjective beliefs, are also factual realities (Fuchs, 2017). As affective care relations are underpinned by values-led thinking, by moral reasoning and feelings for the suffering of the 'other' (or lack of same), they are complex sociological realities. They need to be investigated both as fact and value, as normatively-led practices at micro, meso and macro levels.

Failing to recognize the link between reason and emotion, and between values, emotion and reason, ‘has tended to sustain partial and often alienated views of . . . social life itself’ (Sayer, 2017, p. 474). Values are constitutive elements of social life, not just a means of regulating it (Vandenberghe, 2018). Focusing on social actors as maximizing utilitarians leads to the analytical neglect of other-centred normative social actions (Archer, 2000; Sayer, 2011).

If the values related to nurturing, in all its complexity and contradictions, are defined as having a subsidiary role in social life, then the natural corollary of this is to give limited research attention to the care relations that stem from normative actions, including those that produce or fail to produce love, care and solidarity. Employing an academic framework that assumes people are indifferent to the welfare of others leads to a wider acceptance that indifference to others is ‘standard and appropriate’ (Held, 2006, p. 83).

In sum, the failure to appreciate the role of normatively-led nurturing work as a politically salient dimension in the production of all forms of life, especially social life, the resistance to recognizing the interdependency of the human condition, the lionizing of self-sufficiency as virtue, and the failure to appreciate the complex ways in which values, especially those arising from other-centredness, are not just regulatory but constitutive of social life, comprise four ontological impediments to recognizing the importance of love, care and solidarity for the production of people in their relationality. The summation of these ontological influences has led to a failure to appreciate the significance of the relational self, and with it a significant dimension of moral life that is central to research on social justice (Kittay, 1999, p. 51).

## **Cultural and politico-economic impediments to relational justice: Individualism and neoliberal capitalism**

The impediments to recognizing affective injustices work are not only ontological; they are also cultural, political and economic.

Individualization and individualism are pervasive values of Western European cultures (Beck, 1992; Mau, 2015) upholding individual choice and autonomy as priority principles (Lukes, 1973). These cultural values are exemplified in the self-responsibilized individualism that underpins contemporary concepts of the ideal citizen in Europe (Frericks, 2010, 2014; Taylor-Gooby, 2011). Even within the socioemotional economy of charity and philanthropy, rules of proximity, responsibility and conditionality apply (Flores, 2013). The deep-seated allegiance to individual responsabilization is not a new phenomenon however: it has deep roots in religious thought, especially in Christianity, and in liberal political theory and culture in Europe (Kahl, 2005; Stjernø, 2004).

The move towards responsabilized individualism is also a by-product of the political economy of neoliberal capitalism that devalues caring as a social practice (Fraser, 2016) while lauding the merits of the entrepreneurial persona (Bröckling, 2015). This encourages individuals to be highly competitive, be it in relation to job security, material wealth, social status, personal relationships, or moral worth. The fear and mistrust that status competition produces, in turn, promote ‘status anxieties’, and, correlatively, delegitimize caring for others for fear of losing one’s own competitive advantage (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018).



Growing economic inequality is also a defining feature of neoliberal capitalism (Streeck, 2016), something that was greatly exacerbated by the financial crash of 2008 (Piketty, 2014, pp. 430–436). Such polarization promotes envy and fear while discouraging solidarity with those who are more vulnerable or less well off (Mau, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018).

Finally, competitive individualism and inequality are exacerbated through anti-democratic processes that allow the wealthy and powerful to control the political agendas through their control of capital, the media and indirectly, political institutions themselves, nationally and globally (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2018, pp. 250–251). In the meantime, voices of dissent are suppressed through the undermining of trade unions and critical civil society organizations. This, in turn, marginalizes the voices of those who do care and love work, and those who are too poor, too young, too old, or too vulnerable to make their claim politically for a politics of caring.

While there were many calls for mutual care, national and global solidarity during the COVID-19 crisis, evidence from the global financial crash of 2008 indicates that the interests of the most powerful capitalist class are likely to prevail without organized resistance – especially given the sharp increase in government debt due to costly bailout and recovery programmes. Moreover, the global oligarchical elite have the power to circumvent democratic institutions, by buying political majorities and social legitimacy (Streeck, 2016, pp. 228–230); they can impose austerity and poverty on millions in the interests of financial capitalism, as happened after 2008 (Tooze, 2018).

But capitalist priorities can be resisted, and narratives of relational justice can be part of that resistance. Moving beyond narrow capitalocentrism that puts ‘capital at the gravitational centre of meaning making’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016, p. 194) is one way of helping to make this happen. Not only is there more than one economy in the capitalist economy (Folbre, 1994, 2001), meaning-making does not take place solely within the economic domains of social life. Things matter to people outside of power and money (Sayer, 2011) but people’s relational concerns, their care consciousness (Crean, 2018) need to be named and analysed sociologically if they are to be de-privatized and have political import.

## **Why affective equality and relational justice matters**

### *Social scientific and social justice significance*

Because humans live in affective relational realities, they have emotional ties and bonds that can reinforce their motivation to act as moral agents, to be responsive to others’ vulnerabilities (Tronto, 1993, pp. 134–135). Although people are egotistical, they are not simply egotists; the sets of values that govern people’s actions in everyday life and the emotions that accompany them are central to how people live and define themselves (Sayer, 2005, pp. 949–952).

There has been a failure to fully appreciate the complex role that values play in social action (Vandenberghe, 2018), and the significance of the normative dimension of social life (Sayer, 2011). It is as if indifference to others was an ontological ‘law’ in the human condition. Such a position is sociologically untenable given the empirical evidence underpinning this article and many related studies.

The lack of attention to values has also withdrawn attention from an analysis of *what we care about* academically, and why and how we study certain subjects, and who benefits from our research in the social sciences (Gane, 2011). While these are key questions for the technological sciences (Latour, 2004; Martin et al., 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011) they are also vital for the social sciences (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

Focusing analytical attention on affective care relations, and relatedly on the salience of the normative within social scientific and political analysis, offers a different way of thinking about the sociological analysis of social justice. It incorporates what matters to people in their relational lives into the analysis of institutions and systems, including the analysis of scientific practice itself (Kerr & Garforth, 2016).

While the three-dimensional redistribution/recognition/representation theory of justice developed by Nancy Fraser (2003, 2008)<sup>11</sup> has paved the way for framing questions of social justice within the social sciences, the framework needs to be enhanced by a fourth dimension, of affective relational justice. Focusing sociological attention on affective equality and relational justice opens a space for new normatively-informed modes of scientific analysis within the discipline. It provides a frame for adding affective relational analysis to that of redistribution, recognition and representation in the investigation of social injustices.

### *Political significance*

Relations of love, care and solidarity matter not only for what they can produce personally, and in communities or societies, but also for what they might generate politically in terms of heralding different ways of relating beyond separatedness, competition and aggrandizement. In many respects care is a kind of ‘cultural residual’, an area of human life, experience, and achievement, that the dominant culture neglects, represses and cannot even recognize for its political salience (Williams, 1977, pp. 123–124). But affective care relations are active in the subaltern world of daily life; they are the relations wherein people co-produce each other as human beings and of which they are acutely conscious (Crean, 2018). Although affective relations operate without political ‘citizenship’, lacking a political name and a political voice, like other cultural residuals however, they can and do influence current cultural processes (Williams, 1977, p. 122). It is for this reason that they should be claimed, named, and made visible intellectually and politically.

If sociologists explicitly recognize the ethical-political reality of affective love, care and solidarity as normative values and affective practices, this could not only contribute to a new understanding of how the normative order influences social actions, it could also help change public discourse about politics by making care-related affective justice visible intellectually and politically.

### *Gender significance*

Given that it is women, especially poor women, who do most unpaid and paid care work, relational justice is a highly gendered issue in classed, racial and ethnic terms (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014; Oxfam, 2020). The rising cost of living and indebtedness in capitalist societies have forced many

women to enter employment but without adequate care supports for their children, or for vulnerable adults. Women and men in the Global North pay for childcare while living on limited and precarious incomes, and with significantly underfunded public services. The global chain of caring injustices ensues, whereby poor women of the Global South are actively encouraged and enabled to migrate to the Global North to care for young children and older people at a significant emotional cost to themselves, their own birth children and vulnerable relatives (Fraser, 2016, p. 114).

Given that care relations are central to the operation of the global capitalist economy, any analysis of social justice in sociology needs to be cognizant of this. Not to take affective relations seriously is to align sociology with capitalism's devaluation of caring, treating it, and those (mostly women) who do it as abjected entities, both economically and culturally (Müller, 2019).

## Conclusion

Drawing on the long tradition of critical theories of social justice, Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional perspective is frequently deployed (implicitly if not explicitly) in framing questions of inequality in sociology (be it in terms of redistribution/class, recognition/status, and/or power/representation). While essential, and ground-breaking in challenging injustices, it needs to be enhanced to take account of the affective care-relational domains of life.

Rugged individualism, economic inegalitarianism and anti-democratic processes are endemic to capitalism (Bröckling, 2015; Wright, 2010) making it inherently antagonistic to loving, caring and showing solidarity (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2018). Given how persistent and pervasive both economic (Piketty, 2014) and care inequalities (Oxfam, 2020) are, and how interwoven each is with power injustices globally, it is imperative to take affective care relations seriously in both the political and sociological analyses of injustice (Baker et al., 2004, pp. 57–72; Lynch, 2014, 2020; Lynch et al., 2009a, pp. 12–34).

If the sociological significance of affective care-relational practices, at the micro, meso and macro levels are not made central to sociological and political thinking, these disciplines will fail to investigate a major fount of ethical thinking, relating and working (Oksala, 2016). They will underestimate the importance of the psychosocial reality that moral identity is central to framing a sense of self, in a way that is tied to people's relationality, their sense of connection, obligation and attachment to others (Stets & McCaffree, 2014). For it is within the fields of affective care relations that people learn how to nurture and feel for others, intimately, locally and distally. Ethical dispositions are learned experientially by doing and being loving, caring and solidaristic, and/or by seeing the harm the absence of these dispositions has on humanity, other species and the environment. The 'ethical practice of care' enables people to learn and hear injustices from the ground up. It 'emerges as a generative way' of making private 'sufferings' and injustices politically actionable (Tironi & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2017, p. 91). In making private troubles public issues (Mills, 1959), it is a defining sociological matter.

If sociology takes relational justice seriously, this would also provide an intellectual avenue into a new field of scholarship, one that recognizes the salience of care consciousness (Crean, 2018), and that much of life is lived through the lens of care<sup>12</sup> both in

the market and formal politics. It would also encourage sociologists to explore how affective care-relational injustices are deeply interwoven with economic, cultural and political injustices, as we know already from epidemiologists that societies that have huge wealth/income inequalities not only create poverty and income deprivations, they also generate deep care deprivations reflected in the high rates of mental illness and both personal and institutionalized violence (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, 2018).<sup>13</sup>

While humans are political, economic and cultural beings, they are also caring people – what Tronto has termed *homines curans* (2017, p. 28). An affective care-relational perspective would help enhance social justice thinking by highlighting how people are always vulnerable, relational and interdependent, not only with respect to other humans, but also in relation to other species and the environment. It would help align social justice thinking in a way that recognizes the interdependency of the human and natural worlds, in their creation, maintenance, and repair (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). It could help contribute towards a politics of love rather than a politics of hate and greed (Tronto, 2017, p. 32).

Finally, focusing on the centrality of affective care relations to social life would help create a debate in sociology about thinking *with* and *about* care in the same way that scholars have opened up this debate in science and technology studies (Martin et al., 2015; Murphy, 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, 2017). And it would also contribute to the debate about the constitutive place of values in social scientific analysis (Sayer, 2011, 2017; Vandenberghe, 2017).

Sociology has the potential to challenge the ethic of carelessness and indifference that is endemic to market-driven societies by taking the issue of relational justice as seriously as it takes questions of redistribution, recognition and political representation. It has the capacity to clarify the role of affective care relations as a fount of ethical thinking, relating and working; and in so doing identify ‘cultural residuals’ (Williams, 1977) of care practices that could be generative sites of resistance to the logic and ethics of neoliberal capitalism.

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## Notes

1. Throughout the article, the collective noun of ‘care’ will be used to refer to the three different contexts in which care happens in primary intimate relations, in secondary relations of care, both paid and unpaid, professional and non-professional, and in tertiary relations of solidarity at the political level. See Lynch, 2007 and Lynch, 2020, for a more detailed discussion of these distinctions.
2. A series of studies on the affective inequalities experienced in doing and receiving love and care in intimate, and designated institutional, care settings was undertaken from 2006 to 2007 (EU Framework 6 programme). The first study involved 30 extensive care conversations with carers and those in their care, visits to 21 family care settings, and focus groups with 14 school-going teenagers (Lynch et al., 2009b). The second, mothers’ study, examined the emotional work of 25 mothers who were parents of primary-school children (O’Brien,

- 2009). A further study of people who spent their childhood in institutional care involved care conversations with 28 adults aged 40–65, focusing on care, love and literacy learning (Feeley, 2009). A fourth study of men’s perceptions of masculinity and its relationship to caring was also undertaken with eight men’s groups (Hanlon, 2009; Lynch et al., 2009b, pp. 3–9, 237–250). A study of the impact of managerial reforms on the personal and professional care work of senior managers was undertaken from 2009 to 2011. It involved 23 case studies of senior management appointments across educational sectors: 52 face-to-face interviews with 23 appointees and 29 with members of boards of assessors/key policy-makers. Site visits to each school and college were also undertaken (Lynch et al., 2012, pp. 41–51). A study from 2014 to 2017 examined the relationship between working, learning and caring in higher education: <http://irc-equality.ie/> Ten higher educational institutions were involved, and four were studied in depth. All universities/colleges were visited, and face-to-face interviews were undertaken with 102 employees involving all types and grades of staff (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Lynch et al., 2020). Finally, the authors participated in the EU-funded (Horizon 2020) study of Solidarity in Europe (SOLIDUS) from 2015 to 2018. Five successful solidarity movements were studied in 13 countries; the study focused on the understanding and practice of solidarity during the austerity period: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/649489>
3. These include Benhabib, 2002; Bubeck, 1995; Finch and Groves, 1983; Federici, 2012; Fineman, 1995; Folbre, 1994, 2001; Held, 2006; Himmelweit, 2002; Kittay, 1999; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993. Apologies to the many scholars not listed for reasons of space and language
  4. Deleuze has promoted analysis of the ‘passional’ reality of life (Deleuze, 1990). Classical rationalism and its ‘moral judgment over and against emotions’ is replaced with ‘an ethical evaluation of the rationality of emotions themselves’ (Meiborg & Van Tuinen, 2016, pp. 9–20), including an evaluation of the affective infrastructure of capitalism (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).
  5. For excellent reviews see Barrett, 2006; Leys, 2011; and Wetherell, 2015.
  6. Wetherell claims that the work of Ahmed (2004), while valuable for understanding the cultural politics of emotion, and their affective economies, tends to treat emotions as free floating; affect is decontextualized giving it a non-relational depersonalized representation. Yet affective relations are generated culturally and socially; they are not circulating abstractly in the stratosphere. (Wetherell, 2015, p. 159).
  7. Care of the Earth and other species is also crucial given the relatedness of things and species (Haraway, 2007).
  8. A special edition of *Sociology* (Vol. 51, No. 1, 2017) was devoted to analysing the limiting impact of Eurocentrism on classical sociology.
  9. *Current Sociology*, Vol. 66, No. 4, 2018. The marketization, transnationalization and governance of care are the main themes of this special issue.
  10. Values are deeply implicated not only in the research methodologies employed, but in the research subjects that are prioritized and those that are trivialized or ignored.
  11. It is built on the work of many other critical political egalitarian theorists, especially Honneth, with whom Fraser has been in extensive dialogue.
  12. The work required to ‘maintain continue and repair’ the world (Tronto, 1993, p. 103) is quite considerable. In 2013 people in Germany spent 35% more time performing unpaid work than paid work (Müller, 2019, p. 1). People often prioritize care values over others (Lynch & Lyons, 2009).
  13. And when children and others are deprived of love and care, especially in their formative years, this greatly increases their chances of living with mental health injuries and in poverty (Feeley, 2009; Mulkeen, 2019).

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